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At the [Sixth Annual Grad Scoop](#)

University of California, Davis

July 26, 2019

In 1998, about a year after I completed Harvard Law School, I found myself at age 25 in San Jose, Costa Rica, the site of the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. I had just left big firm and took a 2/3 salary cut to take a job as a human rights lawyer at the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL). Two days into the job, and about to meet my first client, I was both extremely nervous and excited. Something inside me knew that my life was about to be transformed and that my past and present would enmesh and define my career from that day forward.

In walks a woman – she is white, blond, with piercing blue eyes, short in stature. These facts matter. She is carrying a cake with lighted candles and is smiling, though her eyes also revealed fierce determination and sadness. Next to her is an elderly man, indigenous – Mayan, I would later learn – from Guatemala – my father’s birth country. The white woman, whose name I would later learn is Jennifer Harbury, was asking all of us in the room to join her in singing happy birthday to her husband. The elderly man next to her, Mr. Bámaca, was her father-in-law.

The birthday we were celebrating was that of Efraín Bámaca Velásquez, the son of Mr. Bámaca and Jennifer’s husband. The case before the Inter-American Court was about Guatemala’s responsibility for the forced disappearance and torture of Efrain, a Mayan guerilla leader whose fate was unknown more than a decade after he has been disappeared. Back in the office, after the hearing, I was assigned the preparation of final written arguments to the Court. I found myself reading declassified US government documents that revealed that, despite the claims that Efrain had been killed in battle, in fact, the truth was that he had been captured, tortured repeatedly in unspeakable ways, and then disappeared, erasing all traces of his life and of his death.

More than a decade later, we were singing happy birthday to Efraín because Jennifer and Mr. Bámaca were looking for truth and clamoring for justice. They wanted Efrain’s remains, to give him a proper burial and they

wanted the Guatemalan and US governments found responsible for Efrain's cruel fate. The cake with the candles took such a profound new meaning: the painful hope of the survivors who know but pray that their loved one somehow is still alive.

The way I got to read those declassified CIA documents was because by the time I met Jennifer, also a Harvard Law Graduate, she had fasted for 40 days, twice, one before the Guatemalan Congress and one before the US Congress. She had also sued both the US and Guatemala numerous times, her case reaching not only the Inter-American Court but also the U.S. Supreme Court. Her relentless search meant that at least two bodies had been exhumed to reveal the remains of the persons buried were not those of her husband as claimed by the Guatemalan government. The truth was revealed through dental records she had of Bamaca the one time he went to the dentist in the US, the one time he visited her in Texas to get married.

Their love story – I feel I need to summarize it for you – began when Jennifer fell in love with the Guatemalan refugees she met in Texas right after graduating law school who came escaping Guatemala's war. To learn their story, she traveled to Guatemala and climbed the highlands, where she met Efrain and fell in love and then had the most unlikely marriage ceremony in Texas. Trust me, I had to tell this story a lot in the pleadings because everyone questioned the validity of the story. How could a white, blond, blue eyed, Harvard Law graduate possibly marry an illiterate Mayan, and a guerilla leader at that? And if she was not the legitimate wife, then she needed to stop meddling. But when Jennifer spoke of Efraín, it was hard to deny their love, even despite the explicit racism and bias that colored their story.

Then, after years of fighting, one U.S. Senator, Toricelli from New Jersey heeded Jennifer's desperate call and helped her get the CIA declassified documents that confirmed her suspicions. How did the CIA know? Well, the US had been deeply involved in Guatemala's civil war and a paid informant had told the US government of Efrain's fate.

This sounds like a telenovela – a soap opera. You might be asking yourselves – as riveting as this true story is – how is this talk related to me and why I'm here today?

Here is how?

Point number 1: Education and post-graduate education, in particular, will transform your lives and open amazing doors for you that you cannot even imagine today.

Back in 1982, I was one of those kids who belonged to a family that was also escaping Central America's civil wars. My brother – at age 11 – had been forcibly taken by the military in Guatemala, at least for a day until my father found him and pulled some strings to get him out. There are other vague stories I have heard about how my parents' work as ministers in rural communities made them vulnerable as well. After my brother was taken, my mom toyed with bringing her three kids through Mexico and cross the US border. But we got lucky. A church in the US – since my parents were ministers – sponsored them as religious workers to come to the US. This was at the time that so many Central Americans were denied sanctuary – not unlike today.

Then, I could never have imagined that like Jennifer, I too would go to Harvard Law School. In fact, I remember when I was in the sixth grade, a year after my arrival – having learned to speak English in just a year and being called a wetback repeatedly by other kids who looked like me – being asked by my teacher – Ms. Tobin – a wonderful black woman who sang like an angel – what I wanted to be when I grew up. A flight attendant, I declared. She laughed that beautiful laugh and said, "Child, you don't even how smart you are do you? You can do whatever you want. You can even build a plane." I've never forgotten those words. A kind woman in a so-called "at risk" school saw me and propelled me. When I got interviewed by the local news one day during one of those career days at school and was again asked, what do you want to be when you grow up, I looked over at Ms. Tobin, who smiled widely: "A lawyer, I declared."

I did not know then why I said lawyer. Some of that is that we do not know what we do not know. I do not regret for a single moment becoming a lawyer. Despite the not so funny to me, endless lawyer jokes, I am very proud of being a lawyer and it has been absolutely the right choice for me. I'll come back to this point in a bit. For now, however, let me make a second important point.

Point number 2: Be open – in fact – defiant in exploring professional trajectories that will empower you to be your best selves – and so be curious and explore – but also let yourself be guided by your values and your passions.

As I said, for me, my passion was social justice – I believe in equity and fairness and being a lawyer was right for me. For many of us who have grown up to witness injustice – whether economic, political, legal or otherwise – the idea of righting wrongs appeals to us. But know that you can always connect multiple careers to your values – we need you in all spaces, and in all professions.

But let me go back to my story and uncover for you some professions that you may not have considered were relevant to Jennifer’s pursuit of justice:

I told you about the exhumed bodies and how dental records led us to prove Efrain was not the person buried. As a human rights lawyer, I worked a lot with forensic anthropologists who worked in mass graves to help us piece together narratives of what transpired. I also had to work with criminologists who contested the government’s version of how a person might have been killed. Anthropologists also became experts on issues of proving cultural genocide, for example.

As my work in human rights has also shifted to the root causes of war – the exploitation of people and natural resources in the countries where human rights abuses occur, I have worked with scientists who have helped us document contamination and other types of environmental harms flowing from industries like mining, or the use of pesticides. We have also consulted engineers who can explain less destructive ways to extract minerals or oil.

As my work has also shifted to forced migration, I have worked with economists, sociologists, agronomist, and even business people to investigate topics such as how remittances, money that immigrants send home, can be used for economic development; whether it is true that migrants take jobs away from US workers; or that migrants commit more crimes – they do not, by the way – or how to teach agricultural communities sustainable farming practices. I am currently working with psychiatrists and psychologists to figure out how law can have better trauma-informed

policies and practices to adjudicate the claims of asylum seekers and refugees.

So do not limit yourselves. Explore. Be curious. Ask questions. Seek models and mentors. Take advantage of opportunities like today.

I will close with my final point but to make it I have to return to Jennifer and her story.

Jennifer has never found her Efrain – more than three decades after his disappearance. This makes me profoundly sad.

But in the process of finding Efrain – Jennifer transformed so much. Jennifer has continued her work for justice in Guatemala and also her work for refugees in the US.

So much has happened in Guatemala in recent memory that it is mind-boggling. Guatemala had the first domestic trial for genocide against Dictator Rios Montt. He was in power when we fled Guatemala and he was, in my estimation, evil. I got to witness the trial that would lead to his conviction more than thirty years later. His trial lasted months and it was public. Indigenous women who survived the genocide of the Ixil communities of Guatemala were able to provide testimony of their rapes in their native languages. The dictator was convicted and ultimately his conviction was overturned. But that trial lives on.

Of course, the refugee crisis – including for Guatemala – has only intensified in recent years and we are also living within the US a rule of law crisis of our own in our response to it.

It sometimes feels like what's the point?

The point is – and this is my final point –

Point 3: It is both the journey and the destination that should guide you but understand that the destination – the outcome you seek – is not guaranteed except that what is guaranteed is that it is unlikely to happen if you don't undertake the journey.

I dedicated my life to educate young people like you and now, in this role, to create access to more of our talented youth to institutions of higher

learning because I believe in the power of knowledge and of empowered youth to transform our world.

Our society – our communities – the world – needs your brilliance and commitment, and resilience to help solve the most intractable problems. And whether you like it or not, you are here because you are talented and gifted and chosen to lead.

In our lifetime, we – this generation of change agents – may not reach the destination we want but I, at least, hope my legacy will be to leave behind new warriors who will continue to journey for us. When I look at you, you give me hope.

Thank you!